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Tackling Kremlin's Media Capture in Southeast Europe

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Russian sharp power through media capture

- The **instruments** that Russia deploys for establishing informational leverage.
- The **channels** and **narratives** of Russian disinformation utilized to sway views of the West and its key institutions, the EU and NATO.
- The **impact** of Kremlin messaging on societal perceptions as conditioned by audience susceptibility and receptivity.
- The **amplification** of Russian media influence through convergence with the disinformation activities of other authoritarian states, particularly China.

Regional similarities

- Utilizing a network of Russia-owned and sponsored news outlets.
- Leveraging pro-Russian cultural, ideological and linguistic affinities.
- Spreading disinformation on local pseudo-nationalistic and alt-right social media channels.
- Tapping into and instrumentalizing advertising revenue: the role of large Russian-owned companies such as Lukoil.
- Reinforcing governance gaps in the media sphere.

Regional similarities

Directly owned by the Russian state

Outlets such as the national language editions of Sputnik and Russia Beyond display the closest form of proximity as they are directly owned by the Russian state.

Partisan

Partisan outlets published by a domestic political party with strong links to the Kremlin (such as through the reception of funding and political support) also closely promote Russian positions albeit through a distinctive national prism.



Independent

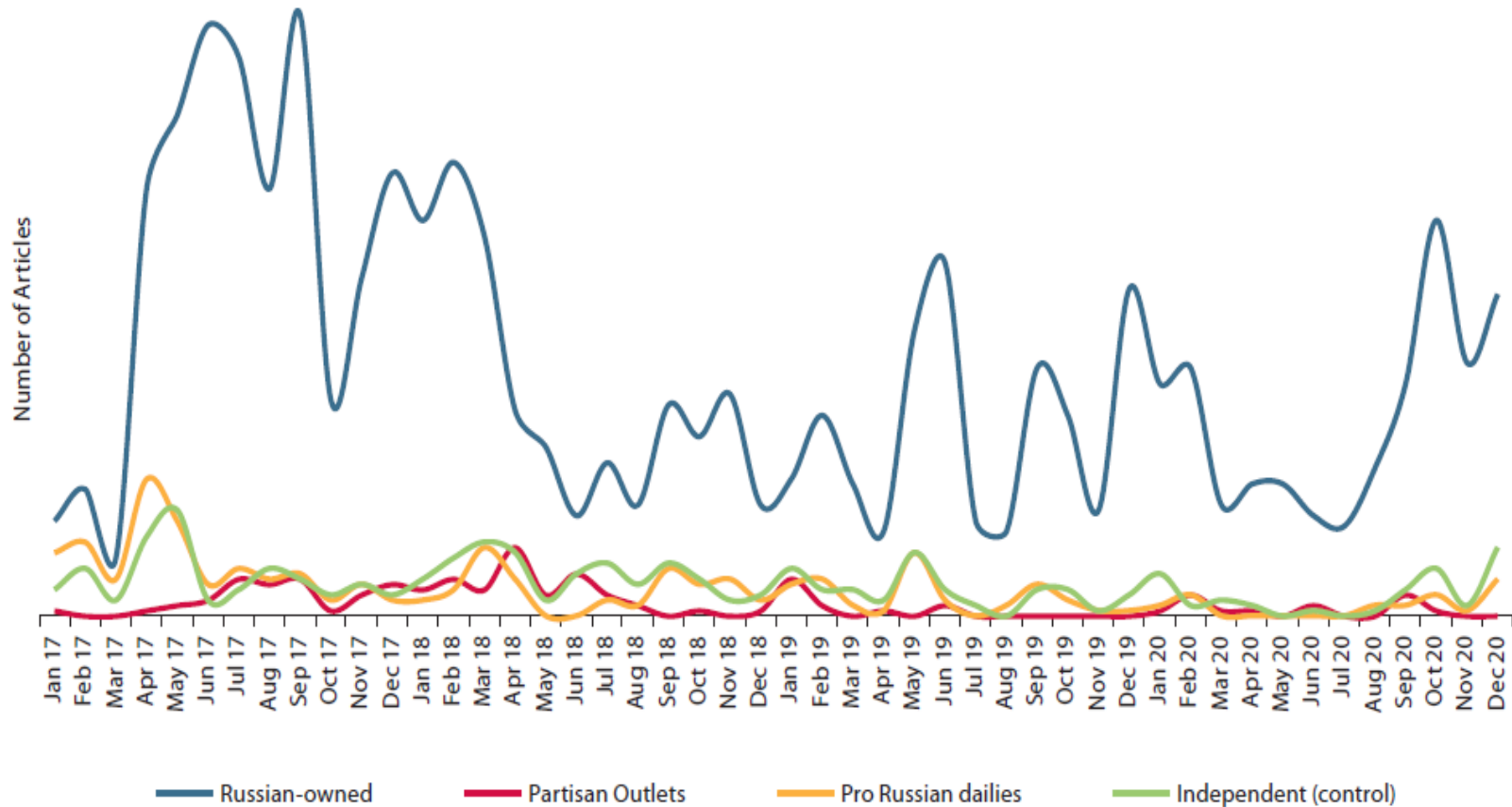
Independent outlets that are unrelated to pro-Russian groups and interests (or indeed any other vested interests) can serve as a benchmark for comparing how a neutral source portrays Russia as opposed to media differentially connected to the Kremlin.

Broader dailies

A greater degree of distance is represented by broader dailies (i.e., more widely circulated or read), which maintain ties to (pro)Russian groups and interests and/or disseminate Kremlin propaganda, while being connected to broader national interest groups and aiming to reach a wider audience (than just party members, for instance).

Regional similarities

Coverage of Sergey Lavrov's statements.



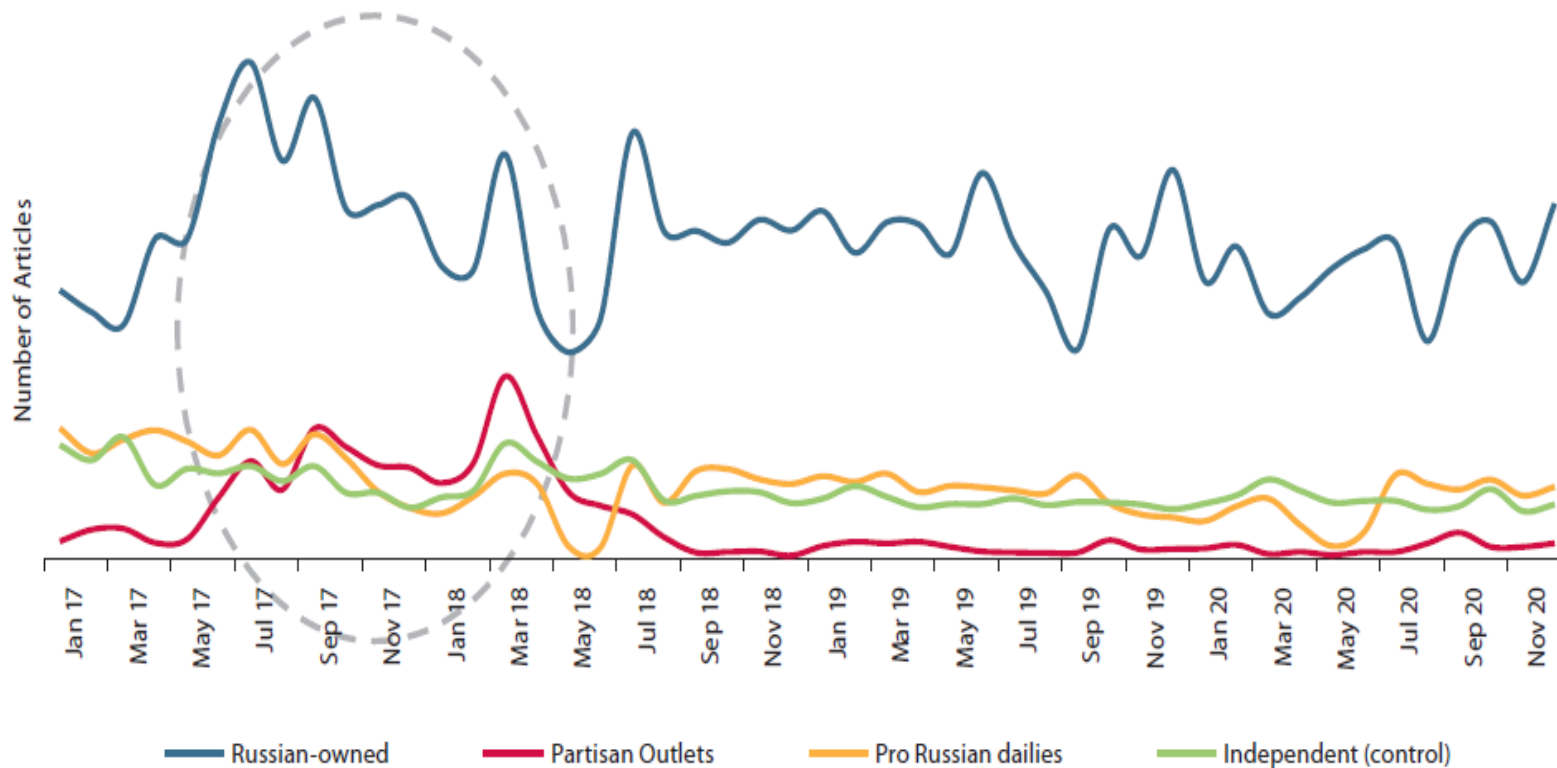
➤ Russian-owned outlets **amplify** with sheer volume the official Kremlin discourse.

Note: Volume of articles containing the key word "Lavrov".

Source: CSD based on the Sensika Saas content tracking tool.

Narratives of Russian media capture

Outlets' activity during the Russian Presidential election campaign in 2018.



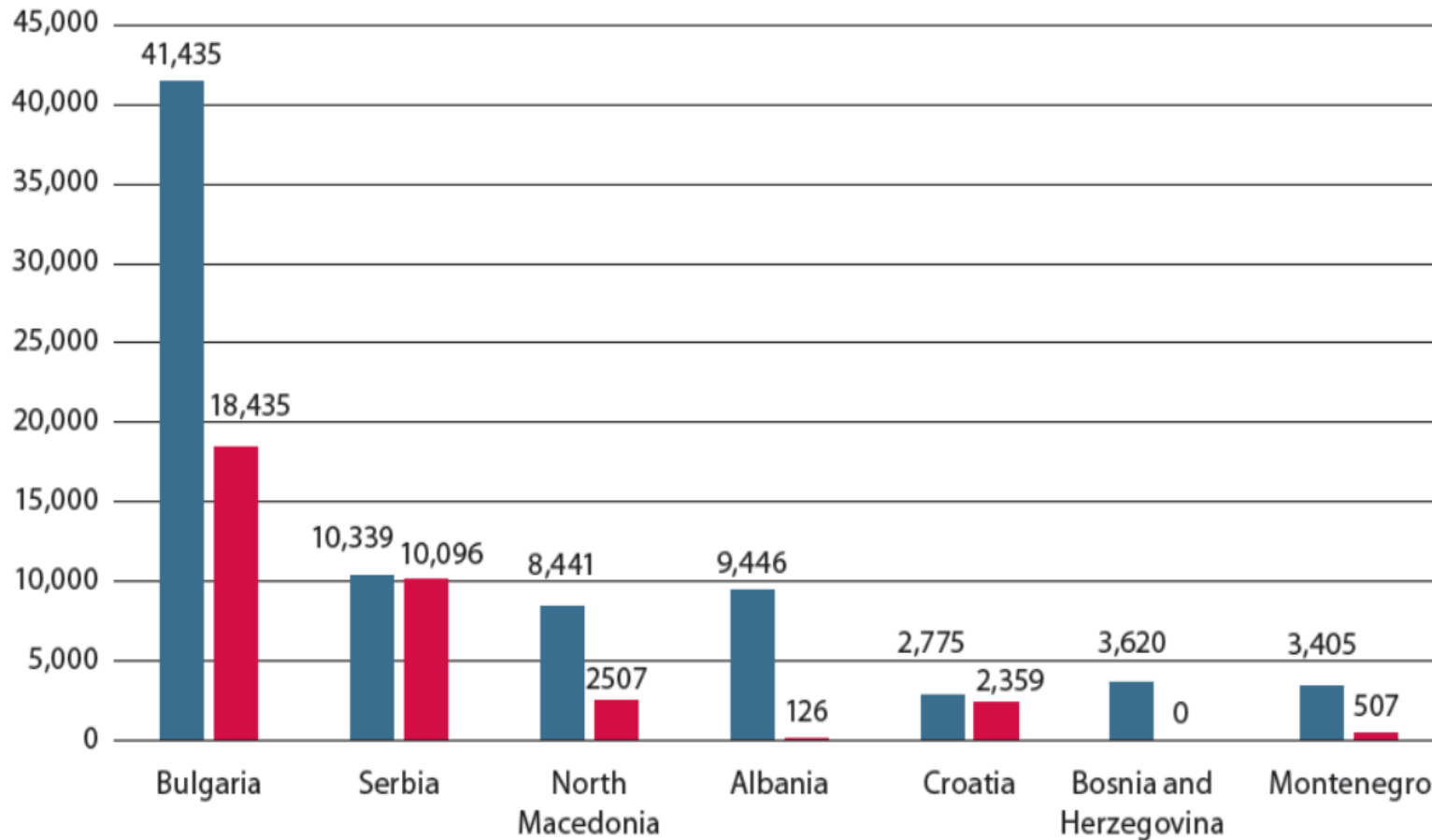
➤ Partisan outlets **shadow the activity of Russia-owned media** in relation to events of significant domestic party interest.

Note: Volume of articles containing the key word "Russia".

Source: CSD based on the Sensika Saas content tracking tool.

Narratives of Russian media capture

Russian Embassies and Rossotrudnichestvo: Total Followers at end of February 2021



➤ The Kremlin's social media strategy: **Bulgaria as an outlier.**

Audience impact of Russian media capture

SEE audiences are susceptible to Russian malign influence activities. Two key trends:

- **Lingering East-West cultural ambivalences** – preference for good relations with both Russia and the West.
- **Prevalent discontent with the process of democratization** and distrust of political institutions.

China gathers broadly positive although unenthusiastic views.

China diffuses its media influence in the Balkans

(1) Sub-regional amplifiers:

- **Radio Ejani** – broadcasts in Albanian and targets all ethnic Albanian-populated areas in the Western Balkans.
- Bosnian **China Today (Kina Danas)** news outlet is popular among China-interested audiences across the Western Balkans.

(2) National-level amplifiers:

- **Russia's local proxies** as enablers of China's media activities. The case of Bulgaria.
- Support from the **highest echelons of power**. The case of Serbia.

A diffusion map of Russian media capture (1)



A diffusion map of Russian media capture (2)



Tackling Russian media capture

National-level initiatives

- Make compulsory the provision of ownership and advertising information in **publicly available national and EU registries**.
- Incorporate specific provisions on the **scope and origin of capital of foreign ownership**.
Strengthen safeguards in relation to PEPs.
- Initiate a fundamental **rethinking of existing media ownership models**.

The Transatlantic community: the role of the EU and the US

- Forge a **transatlantic anti-corruption and financial transparency response and enforcement mechanisms**.
- The EU should monitor the **allocation of communication funds**. The Western Balkans should be included in the EU's **Democracy Action Plan and Digital Services act programming**.
- US government agencies should enhance **multilateral exchange and media freedom support programs**.

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Report available on csd.bg



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Thank you

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